

# More spending in schools doesn't necessarily improve learning | Guest op

By Liv Finne  
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After six months of debate and convening three special sessions, lawmakers in Olympia finally reached agreement on a state budget for 2015-17.

The new budget voted on in July increases spending on K-12 public schools from \$15.26 billion to \$18.15 billion, an increase of 19 percent. Lawmakers achieved this large rise in spending with the natural increase in current revenues, without imposing new taxes on Washington families and business owners.

Earlier, Gov. Jay Inslee broke a campaign promise and said he wanted to impose a capital gains income tax, saying it was essential to fund schools. Lawmakers of both parties rejected the proposal.

The new budget funds class size reductions to 19-22 students in grades K-3, to 17-21 students in grades K-3 in high-poverty schools, expands all-day kindergarten and preschool, provides large increases in materials, supplies and operating costs, expands learning assistance and other categorical programs and increases the pay of teachers and other school employees. Republicans in the Senate pushed hard for education spending increases without raising taxes.

Democratic and Republican lawmakers worked hard to fulfill the requirements of the state supreme court's 2012 McCleary decision. Since then lawmakers have increased state spending on public schools by over \$4.5 billion, a 32-percent increase in four years.

The 2015-17 budget represents one of the largest one-time increases in public education spending in state history. This graph illustrates how much the legislature has increased spending on schools in recent years.

While administrators and union executives will certainly welcome more public money in the system, funding boosts in past years show that more spending alone does not improve learning outcomes for children.

As the court ruled in McCleary: “Pouring more money into an outmoded system will not succeed.” Here are some of the structural reasons more spending alone doesn’t work:

- Only 60 cents of every education dollar reaches the classroom;
- The majority of school employees are not classroom teachers;
- Seniority rules keep “lemon” teachers in the classroom;
- Tenure rules make it hard to fire low-performing principals;
- Good teachers cannot receive performance bonuses;
- Teachers must pay union dues or be fired.

Lawmakers did offer bills to end automatic seniority rules in layoffs and assignments, in an effort to raise teacher quality, but these improvements were blocked by union executives.

The session again highlighted the state’s powerful teachers union, the WEA, as the primary obstacle to reform. Union executives closed schools across the state in a series of rolling, one-day walkouts, yet the only message behind the strike action was more spending, especially pay raises for adults, not policy improvements to help children.

In the years ahead we should not be surprised if the large increases in education spending do little to improve student learning. Large increases have been enacted before, while overall test scores remain flat, the dropout rate is about the same and the achievement gap has grown worse.

The good news is lawmakers decided not to increase the financial burden they place on Washington families with a tax increase. Still, there is no reason to think a 19-percent increase in education spending without structural improvements in how the money is spent will produce better results for children.

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